**Transcendence Beyond Anthropomorphism: A Comparative Philosophical–Philological Study of Krishna, the Buddha, Laozi, and Muhammad**

***Jayanantaka***

**Prologue: The Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant**

Many civilizations have narrated the story of blind men touching an elephant, each convinced that the fragment they grasped was the whole: the leg as a pillar, the trunk as a snake, the ear as a fan. The parable, known from the Buddhist *Udāna*, the Jain *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, the Hindu *Nītiśataka*, and medieval Islamic literature, reveals the shared human temptation to absolutize a partial perception. When the object of inquiry is the Divine, this temptation grows stronger. Cultures across the ancient world fashioned gods in their own likeness—majestic, yes, but still bound by hunger, anger, rivalry, desire, and fear.

Yet from within these same cultures emerged voices of critique—radical in their simplicity, transformative in their implications. Krishna questioned the worship of Indra, the Vedic war-god intoxicated with soma and pride. The Buddha rebuked Mahābrahmā for claiming creatorhood. Laozi negated the very possibility of naming the Eternal. Muhammad shattered the idols of Mecca and declared a God beyond form, genealogy, and likeness.

This article investigates these four critiques—not as isolated events, but as manifestations of a deeper philosophical trajectory: **the rise of transcendence over anthropomorphism**. Drawing upon close philological reading of Sanskrit, Pāli, Classical Chinese, and Arabic texts, the study argues that Krishna, the Buddha, Laozi, and Muhammad—despite differing metaphysics—share a common impulse toward a conception of Ultimate Reality that is **unconditioned, unpictured, and uncontainable by human categories**.

**The Rise of Transcendence in Hindu Thought: Krishna's Rejection of Indra and the Limits of Vedic Anthropomorphism**

The Vedic hymns portray Indra as a heroic figure—thunder-wielding, pleasure-seeking, conquering, jealous, boastful. He slays Vṛtra, drinks vast quantities of soma, and triumphs through force. As a deity, he is magnificent yet profoundly anthropomorphic. By the time of the *Mahābhārata*, philosophical currents from the Upaniṣads had already shifted the center of gravity from ritual deities to metaphysical principles: *Brahman*, *ātman*, *paramātman*.

Within this setting, Krishna's discourse with the cowherds of Vraja, narrated in the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, becomes more than a pastoral anecdote. When the villagers prepare lavish offerings to Indra to ensure rainfall, Krishna intervenes. He questions the efficacy of appeasing a capricious deity whose moods dictate agricultural fortune. He urges them instead to follow the intrinsic order of action—*svadharma*—rather than propitiating Indra's vanity.

Indra retaliates with a deluge, but Krishna lifts Govardhana Hill to shield the villagers, humiliating the god. Philosophically, this is a demotion of Indra, reducing him to a contingent being within a cosmos governed by deeper metaphysical law.

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna's criticism becomes explicit:

"Those whose knowledge is stolen by desires
choose to worship other gods…

Whatever result they seek from such worship,
it is I alone who grant it."
*(Bhagavad Gītā 7.20–23)*[1]

Here Krishna universalizes the critique. The issue is not merely Indra's pride, but the limitation inherent in polytheistic devotion. All gods are partial; all worship is ultimately grounded in a single Reality.

Further, Krishna declares:

"I am the source of all existence;
from Me everything flows."
*(Bhagavad Gītā 10.8)*[2]

The philology of *īśvara*, *brahman*, and *puruṣottama* in the Gītā reveals a conceptual shift: divinity is no longer a magnified human but an ontological foundation. Anthropomorphic deities become manifestations—valid as symbolic aids but metaphysically subordinate.

Krishna's rejection of Indra therefore marks a pivot point in Hindu religiosity—from ritual appeasement to metaphysical interiorization.

**The Buddha Versus Mahābrahmā: A Radical Critique of Divine Personhood**

In ancient India, Brahmā was regarded as a cosmic creator. The Upaniṣads sometimes depict him as the first-born, the world-maker. By the Buddha's time, devotion to Brahmā coexisted with emerging metaphysical speculations.

Yet the Buddha, in a move unprecedented in religious history, undermined the claim of any being—whether god, Brahmā, or otherwise—to absolute status.

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* traces the belief in a creator-god not to metaphysical truth but to a psychological limitation: the memory of certain Brahmā beings does not extend beyond the beginning of their rebirth. Mistaking their temporal precedence for absolute origin, they proclaim:

"I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Supreme One,
the Creator, the Father of All."
*(Dīgha Nikāya 1)*[3]

But the Buddha attributes this claim to ignorance.

The *Brahma-nimantanika Sutta* presents an even sharper confrontation. Brahmā Baka asserts:

"This is eternal, this is permanent, this is absolute.
There is no beyond."
*(MN 49)*[4]

The Buddha replies with philosophical precision:

"You have been misled by your ignorance, Baka.
You imagine the limited as the limitless."

Even more striking is *Udāna 8.3*, where the Buddha describes the ultimate reality:

“There is, monks, an Unborn, an Unmade, an Unoriginated,
an Unconditioned.
If there were not this Unborn,
there could be no escape from what is born, made, originated, and conditioned.”[5]

The Pāli terms *ajāta*, *abhūta*, *asaṅkhata* dismantle any notion of a personal creator. The Absolute in Buddhism is not a god among gods but the cessation of all reification.

**Buddhism therefore initiates a philosophical monotheism without a monotheistic deity**: a transcendence beyond divine personhood.

**Laozi and the Tao: The Apex of Anti-Anthropomorphic Theology**

Where Krishna centralizes the divine and the Buddha deconstructs it, Laozi initiates a third path: apophatic monism. The *Dao De Jing* begins with a linguistic revolution:

“The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be named is not the everlasting name.”
*(Dao De Jing 1)*[6]

Unlike Vedic gods or Buddhist cosmology, Taoism denies the legitimacy of naming Ultimate Reality at all.

In chapter 25 Laozi writes:

“There is a thing existing in chaos,
before Heaven and Earth…
Silent, formless, standing alone, unchanging,
circulating and never exhausted.
It may be called the mother of all things.”[7]

This is not a deity but a metaphysical source. Tao has no hunger, no jealousy, no triumphs. It “does not act, yet nothing is left undone” (*wu wei*). In chapter 34:

“The Dao is great.
It flows everywhere to the left and the right…
It clothes and nourishes all things
but does not claim lordship.”[8]

From a philological standpoint, the key Taoist terms—*Dao*, *De*, *wu*, *zi ran*—denote an impersonal cosmological principle. Taoism thus offers a theologically minimalist yet metaphysically maximalist vision: the Real is pure formlessness.

**Muhammad and the Restoration of Absolute Transcendence**

Arabia before Islam was filled with anthropomorphic deities: al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, Manāt, Hubal. These gods ate, married, bore children, argued, and acted as enlarged tribal chiefs.

Muhammad’s proclamation was uncompromising:

“Say: He is Allah, the One.
Allah, the Eternal Refuge.
He begets not, nor is He begotten.
And none is comparable to Him.”
*(Qur’an 112:1–4)*[9]

This short chapter dismantles four pillars of ancient Near Eastern anthropomorphism:

• unity (*aḥad*)
• independence (*ṣamad*)
• non-genealogy (refuting divine fatherhood or sonship)
• incomparability (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay’*)[10]

Elsewhere the Qur’an affirms:

“Vision cannot grasp Him,
but He grasps all vision.”
*(Qur’an 6:103)*[11]

The Qur’anic God has no body, no image, no likeness, no form. Even metaphors such as “hand” or “face” are understood by classical theologians (e.g., al-Rāzī, al-Bāqillānī) as idiomatic expressions, not corporeal descriptions.

Islam thus becomes the culmination of the ancient Near Eastern struggle against anthropomorphism that began with the prophets and is here expressed with unparalleled clarity.

**A Philosophical Synthesis: Four Traditions, One Trajectory**

Despite vast differences in metaphysics, rituals, and cosmologies, Krishna, the Buddha, Laozi, and Muhammad articulate overlapping themes:

• **Krishna**: Anthropomorphic gods are limited emanations.
• **Buddha**: No god can claim absolute creatorhood.
• **Laozi**: Ultimate Reality transcends all names and forms.
• **Muhammad**: God has no likeness and no genealogy.

These positions converge in a unified philosophical insight:

**Ultimate Reality is categorically unlike anything within the world.**

Anthropomorphism is not merely mistaken—it constrains the Infinite within finite categories. The Real cannot be pictured, imagined, or conceptualized without distortion.

Thus, each tradition—whether theistic, non-theistic, or meta-theistic—seeks a truth that liberates the mind from the tyranny of images.

**Conclusion**

From Krishna’s deflation of Indra, to the Buddha’s critique of Brahmā, to Laozi’s nameless Tao, to Muhammad’s proclamation of divine incomparability, the history of religious thought reveals a

consistent expansion of theological consciousness. The Divine becomes less like us and more like the ground of being itself—unborn, unconditioned, unnameable, incomparable.

Humanity, in touching the elephant of the sacred, grasps not a leg or ear, but the realization that **the truth is beyond all forms**.

**Footnotes**

[1] *Bhagavad Gītā* 7:20–23.
[2] *Bhagavad Gītā* 10:8.
[3] *Dīgha Nikāya* 1, *Brahmajāla Sutta*.
[4] *Majjhima Nikāya* 49, *Brahma-nimantanika Sutta*.
[5] *Udāna* 8.3.
[6] *Dao De Jing* 1.
[7] *Dao De Jing* 25.
[8] *Dao De Jing* 34.
[9] Qur'an 112:1–4.
[10] Qur'an 42:11.
[11] Qur'an 6:103.

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